



The Holy See

PASTORAL VISIT
OF HIS HOLINESS POPE BENEDICT XVI
IN POLAND

ADDRESS OF THE HOLY FATHER

ECUMENICAL ENCOUNTER

Warsaw, 25 May 2006

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

“Grace to you and peace from him who is and who was and who is to come, and from the seven spirits who are before his throne, and from Jesus Christ the faithful witness, the first-born of the dead, and the ruler of kings on earth” (*Rev 1:4-5*). In these words with which Saint John greets the seven Churches of Asia in the Book of the Apocalypse, I wish to address my own warm greetings to all who are present here, especially to the representatives of the Churches and Ecclesial Communities affiliated to the Polish Council for Ecumenism. To Archbishop Jeremiasz of the Autocephalous Orthodox Church, the President of the Council, I express my thanks for his greetings and his words of spiritual union addressed to me just now. And I greet Archbishop Alfons Nossol, President of the Council for Ecumenism of the Polish Episcopal Conference.

What unites us here today is our desire to meet one another, and to give glory and honour to our Lord Jesus Christ in our common prayer: “to him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood and made us a kingdom, priests to his God and Father” (*Rev 1:5-6*). We are grateful to our Lord, because he gathers us together, he grants us his Spirit and he enables us – over and above what still separates us – to cry out “Abba, Father”. We are convinced that it is he himself who intercedes unceasingly in our favour, pleading for us: “May they become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me” (*Jn 17:23*). Together with you I give thanks for the gift of this encounter of common prayer. I see it as

a stage in the implementation of the firm purpose that I made at the beginning of my Pontificate, to consider a priority in my ministry the restoration of full visible unity among Christians. My beloved Predecessor, the Servant of God John Paul II, stated clearly when he visited this Church of the Most Holy Trinity in 1991: "However much we dedicate ourselves to work for unity, it always remains a gift of the Holy Spirit. We will be available to receive this gift to the extent that we open our minds and hearts to him through the Christian life and above all through prayer." In fact, it is impossible for us to "make" unity through our own powers alone. As I recalled during last year's ecumenical encounter in Cologne: "We can only obtain unity as a gift of the Holy Spirit." For this reason, our ecumenical aspirations must be steeped in prayer, in mutual forgiveness and in the holiness of life of each of us. I express my satisfaction at the fact that here in Poland, the Polish Council for Ecumenism and the Roman Catholic Church have launched numerous initiatives in this area.

"Behold, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him" (*Rev 1:7*). The words of the Apocalypse remind us that we are all on a journey towards the definitive encounter with Christ, when he will reveal before our eyes the meaning of human history, whose centre is the Cross of his saving sacrifice. As a community of disciples, we are directed towards that encounter, filled with hope and trust that it will be for us the day of salvation, the day when all our longings are fulfilled, thanks to our readiness to let ourselves be guided by the mutual charity which his Spirit calls forth within us. Let us build this trust not on our own merits, but on the prayer with which Christ reveals the meaning of his coming on earth and of his redeeming death: "Father, I desire that they also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to behold my glory which you have given me in your love for me before the foundation of the world" (*Jn 17:24*). On our journey towards the encounter with Christ who "is coming with the clouds", through our lives we announce his death, we proclaim his resurrection, as we wait for him to come again. We feel the weight of the responsibility which all this entails; the message of Christ, in fact, must reach everyone on earth, thanks to the commitment of those who believe in him and who are called to bear witness that he is truly sent by the Father (*cf. Jn 17:23*). As we proclaim the Gospel, then, we must be moved by the aspiration to cultivate mutual relations of sincere charity, in such a way that, in the light of these, all may know that the Father sent the Son and that he loves the Church and each one of us just as he loved the Son (*cf. Jn 17:23*). The task of Christ's disciples, the task of each of us, is therefore to tend towards that unity, in such a way that we become, as Christians, the visible sign of his saving message, addressed to every human being.

Allow me to recall once more the ecumenical encounter that took place in this church with the participation of your great compatriot John Paul II, and his address, in which he outlined as follows his vision of the efforts directed towards the full unity of Christians: "The challenge that we face is to overcome the obstacles step by step ... and to grow together in that unity of Christ which is one only, the unity with which he endowed the Church from the beginning. The seriousness of the task prohibits all haste or impatience, but the duty to respond to Christ's will demands that we remain firm on the path towards peace and unity among all Christians. We know very well that it is not we

who will heal the wounds of division and re-establish unity; we are simple instruments that God will be able to employ. Unity among Christians will be a gift of God, in his time of grace. Let us humbly tend towards that day, growing in love, in mutual forgiveness and in mutual trust.”

Since that encounter, much has changed. God has granted us to take many steps towards mutual understanding and rapprochement. Allow me to recall to your attention some ecumenical events which have taken place in the world during that time: the publication of the Encyclical Letter *Ut Unum Sint*; the Christological agreements with the pre-Chalcedonian Churches; the signing at Augsburg of the “[Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification](#)”; the meeting on the occasion of the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000 and the ecumenical memorial of twentieth-century witnesses of faith; the resumption of Catholic-Orthodox dialogue at world level, the [funeral of Pope John Paul II](#) with the participation of almost all Churches and Ecclesial Communities. I am aware of the fact that here too, in Poland, this fraternal aspiration towards unity can boast concrete successes. I would like to mention at this time: the signing in the year 2000 in this very church, on the part of the Roman Catholic Church and the Churches affiliated to the Polish Council for Ecumenism, of the declaration of the mutual recognition of the validity of Baptism; the institution of the Commission for Dialogue of the Polish Episcopal Conference and the Polish Council for Ecumenism, to which the Catholic Bishops and the heads of other Churches belong; the institution of the bilateral commissions for theological dialogue between Catholics and Orthodox, Lutherans, members of the Polish National Church, Mariavites and Adventists; the publication of the ecumenical translation of the New Testament and the Book of Psalms; the initiative called “Aid for Children at Christmas”, in which the charitable organizations of the Churches work together: Catholic, Orthodox, and Evangelical.

We note much progress in the field of ecumenism and yet we always await something more. Allow me to draw attention to two questions for today, in somewhat greater detail. The first concerns the charitable service of the Churches. There are many brothers and sisters who expect from us the gift of love, of trust, of witness, of spiritual and concrete material help. I referred to this problem in my first Encyclical *Deus Caritas Est*, in which I said: “Love of neighbour, grounded in the love of God, is first and foremost a responsibility for each individual member of the faithful, but it is also a responsibility for the entire ecclesial community at every level: from the local community to the particular Church and to the Church universal in its entirety. As a community, the Church must practise love” (no. 20). We cannot forget the essential idea that from the outset constituted the very firm foundation for the disciples’ unity: “within the community of believers there can never be room for a poverty that denies anyone what is needed for a dignified life” (*ibid.*). This idea is always current, even if in the course of the centuries the forms of fraternal aid have changed; accepting contemporary charitable challenges depends in large measure on our mutual co-operation. I rejoice that this problem finds a vast resonance in the world in the form of numerous ecumenical initiatives. I note with appreciation that in the community of the Catholic Church and in other Churches and Ecclesial Communities, various new forms of charitable activity have spread and old ones have reappeared with renewed vigour. They are forms which often combine

evangelization and works of charity (cf. *ibid.*, 30b). It seems that, despite all the differences that need to be overcome in the sphere of interdenominational dialogue, it is legitimate to attribute charitable engagement to the ecumenical community of Christ's disciples in search of full unity. We can all enter into co-operation in favour of the needy, exploiting this network of reciprocal relations, the fruit of dialogue between ourselves and of joint action. In the spirit of the gospel commandment we must assume this devoted solicitude towards those in need, whoever they may be. In this regard, I wrote in my Encyclical that: "the building of a better world requires Christians to speak with a united voice in working to inculcate 'respect for the rights and needs of everyone, especially the poor, the lowly and the defenceless'" (no. 30b). To all those who are taking part in our encounter today I express the wish that the practice of fraternal *caritas* will bring us ever closer to one another and will render our witness in favour of Christ more credible before the world.

The second question to which I want to refer concerns married life and family life. We know that among Christian communities, called to witness to love, the family occupies a special place. In today's world, in which international and intercultural relations are multiplying, it happens increasingly often that young people from different traditions, different religions, or different Christian denominations, decide to start a family. For the young people themselves and for those dear to them, it is often a difficult decision that brings with it various dangers concerning both perseverance in the faith and the future structuring of the family, the creation of an atmosphere of unity in the family and of suitable conditions for the spiritual growth of the children. Nevertheless, thanks to the spread of ecumenical dialogue on a larger scale, the decision can lead to the formation of a practical laboratory of unity. For this to happen there is a need for mutual good will, understanding and maturity in faith of both parties, and also of the communities from which they come. I would like to express my appreciation for the Bilateral Commission of the Council for Ecumenical Issues of the Polish Episcopal Conference and of the Polish Council for Ecumenism, which have begun to draft a document presenting common Christian teaching on marriage and family life and establishing principles acceptable to all for contracting interdenominational marriages, indicating a common programme of pastoral care for such marriages. To all of you I express the wish that in this delicate area reciprocal trust and co-operation between the Churches may grow, fully respecting the rights and responsibility of the spouses for the faith formation of their own family and the education of their children.

"I made known to them your name, and I will make it known, that the love with which you loved me may be in them, and I in them" (*Jn* 17:26). Brothers and Sisters, placing all our trust in Christ, who makes his name known to us, let us walk every day towards the fulness of fraternal reconciliation. May his prayer cause the community of his disciples on earth, in its mystery and in its visible unity, to become ever more a community of love reflecting the unity of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.

